Through vivid illustrations and clever verse, Jack Prelutsky’s *The Swamps of Sleethe: Poems from Beyond the Solar System* details the inhospitable habitat of nineteen very different planets. With every turn of the page, the reader discovers a new planet and its uniquely deadly characteristics. From the disemboweling demon birds of Lonithor to the agonizing and fatal sounds on Ning-fa-dee, it soon becomes clear that although the poems have some humorous undertones to them, a terrible death inevitably awaits on each planet.

After the deafening visit on Ning-fa-dee, the reader encounters the final poem of the book, *The Strovilean Explorers*. The very sobering illustration speaks volumes about the direction the poem is about to take. It depicts three cute, but very surprised aliens that
have just landed on some unknown planet. In fact, it is the only poem not named after the planet being described. Images of destruction and pollution surround the explorers, as they look onward with awestruck alien eyes. All the Strovilean explorers seem to find is brown dead terrain, factory smoke stacks, and empty forests of stumps. As the poem progresses and begins to speak of callousness, war, and toxic waste, it soon becomes apparent that the planet may be closer to home than expected. In an instant, the growing fear in the pit of your stomach turns into a lump in your throat as the reader is finally told we are on planet Earth. It concludes with the abrupt departure of the Strovilean Explorers, sadly returning to their planet far away.

This book, apparently having been inspired by his love for sci-fi novels and Star Trek, is playfully reminiscent of some of Shel Silverstein’s poetry. The creative twists that appear on some of the planets seem to compel a reader to continue the journey beyond the solar system. The darkness and gloom surrounding each of Prelutsky’s planets is reminiscent of Edward Gorey’s classic The Gashlycrumb Tinies that featured unique illustrations and the unfortunate fatal circumstances of twenty-six children.

While Prelutsky’s work incorporates a variety of poetic devices and techniques, I am particularly fond of his well-crafted alliteration, the percussive language that pleases the tongue, and his inclusion of some challenging vocabulary for young readers to tackle. I even found myself struggling to remember the meaning of the word miasmic. As an added treat, some of the planets’ names are anagrams of some characteristic on the planet.

The contemplative end to the book opens up some interesting ideas about the state and care of our own planet, and provides a great opportunity for teachers to have important discussions with students. While some earthlings may not appreciate the overarching comparison to the other planets Prelutsky describes, the fact that the book had a clear message and a call to action came as a welcomed surprise at the end of the book. I found myself continuously rereading the final poem reflecting on the various implications Prelutsky made.

Despite how dark and gloomy it may be, this book may be just the tool to engage young male readers with poetry. For teachers, this is a great vehicle to reach some challenging ideas and discussions ranging from metaphor and personification to the environment, war, and, of course, outer space. Richly illustrated by Jimmy Pickering, this fun read is sure to capture the imaginations of many young readers.

About the Author

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